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Ellis, Henry

What positivism means

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WHAT POSITIVISM MEANS:

A Brief Summary of its Doctrines and Aims.

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HENRY ELLIS.

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WHAT POSITIVISM MEANS.

Positivism, or the Religion of Humanity, is the name given by the French philosopher, Auguste Comte, to the system of thought and conduct founded by him, and signifies that it rests on a basis of demonstrable, or "positive", science. The name has been objected to in some quarters, as being ungainly, and in others as suggesting the idea of dogmatism. To the first of these objections, although, perhaps, superficially true, it may be replied that every system has a fair claim to be recognized by the appellation bestowed on it by its founder; and this is especially the case where a man like Comte is concerned. The other objection, expressing the idea that Positivism leans towards intellectual autocracy, can be maintained only so long as ignorance of its real nature prevails. In addition to the qualities of *reality*, *utility*, *certainty*, and *precision*, which are connected in ordinary language with the term *positive*, Comte points out that, when science was applied to the study of social phenomena, it at once assumed an *organic* character, and that, being organic, it necessarily became *relative*. It could not, however, become relative without becoming also *sympathetic*, and it is this last quality which, although usually regarded as having no connection with science, Comte declares to be specially typical of Positivism.

In his famous Law of Intellectual Progress, without a reference to which even the briefest account of Positivism would be imperfect, Comte asserts that every theoretical conception framed by the human mind passes through three stages; the first being the Theological, or fictitious;

the second, the Metaphysical, or abstract; the third, the Positive, or scientific. The first of these stages is always provisional, the second simply transitional, the third alone definitive. It is not intended to discuss here at any length the truth of this law, which can be adequately appreciated only after a study of Comte's Philosophy of History; but it may be mentioned that it has been accepted by various thinkers of eminence, and notably by John Stuart Mill. Considering, however, its importance as furnishing the foundation from which the whole Positivist system springs, it will, perhaps, be well to give a very brief explanation of its meaning, which is this:—From the earliest epoch at which we can conceive man to have become possessed of even the smallest amount of speculative power, he must spontaneously have been led to theorize, although in a very crude way, on the origin and meaning of the multitudinous facts of the world around him, and must, for his own satisfaction, have endeavoured to frame some explanation which might account for their existence. Of real knowledge he could have but little, and his means of acquiring it were very slender. He was, therefore, necessarily thrown back upon imagination and hypothesis; and the simplest and readiest hypothesis which could, under the circumstances, present itself to him was, that the endless motion and variety he found pervading the world were the products of intelligence of some kind, resembling that which he himself was conscious of possessing, although, of course, infinitely more powerful. This assumption lies at the root of all theological philosophy, whatever the precise shape of the doctrines which, from age to age, have been built upon it. It is, however, a mental process, which, according to Comte, is itself also susceptible of analysis into three stages. In the first of these, primitive man, knowing nothing of the distinction which, with the progress of science, has been drawn between organic and inorganic nature, incapable of realizing the ultimate difference between life and death, supposes all matter to be animated, and assumes that the intelligences, to which he ascribes the changes he sees, dwell in and form part of the objects with whose existence his senses make him acquainted. The lion roars, the fish swims, the eagle soars, because it is alive and possessed of an intelligence similar to his own. And so the river flows, the cloud

moves, the lightning flashes, because, so far as he knows, it, too, is alive, and endowed with intelligence.

This mode of explanation, which Comte denominated Fetichism, was regarded by him as the inevitable starting-point of man's intellectual activity. With the increase of knowledge, however, and the advance of reasoning-power, it was eventually found to be insufficient. The hypothesis of universal, all-permeating life and will was discovered to be irreconcilable with the facts furnished by ever-widening experience, and it had accordingly to be modified. The world was still assumed to be governed by intelligence, but that quality was no longer attributed to inanimate bodies, upon which man had, by degrees, learned to exercise, within certain limits, an unquestioned power. It was now supposed to reside in certain supernatural beings, having no corporeal existence, and dwelling apart from matter, although continuing to preside over different groups of phenomena manifested by matter—beings which were accessible to the prayers of man, and susceptible of being propitiated by his sacrifices. With this form of philosophy, known as Polytheism, the reign of theology, properly speaking, began.

But this enormous effort of abstraction once accomplished, by which the attributes of Life and Will were detached from the countless objects of inanimate nature, and bestowed on a comparatively restricted number of purely mythical gods and goddesses, it was inevitable that this theory should have a much less stable existence than that which preceded it. A gradual process of concentration in the number of deities, to which, from the outset, the system was necessarily exposed, could eventually have but one logical termination. This was the establishment of Monotheism, and the recognition of a single god as the legitimate heir to the government of the universe. Every Polytheistic system must, in the nature of things, come to this in the end.

So long, however, as theological methods were pursued, so long, that is to say, as men persisted in inquiring into the *causes* of phenomena, the answers obtained were more and more doomed to be regarded as unsatisfactory and delusive. Men were, however—as they still are—reluctant to frankly abandon the search for causes; but, growing mistrustful of purely theological solutions, the habit was,

by degrees, formed of silently ignoring them, and seeking the desired explanation in various abstract principles, quite as much the creation of their own minds as theology, and quite as unreal: of which tendency a familiar illustration is afforded in the case of Molière's aspirant to medical honours, who, amidst the applause of the Court of Examiners, explains the narcotic properties of opium, not by the soothing intervention of the god of sleep, but by the assumption that it is possessed of a certain "dormitive virtue". This method marks what Comte calls the Metaphysical stage, and is regarded by him as a mere transition from the Theological search into causes to the final, scientific, Positive stage, in which all hope is definitively abandoned of ever learning the real nature of causes, and men are contented to voluntarily restrict themselves to the study of the *laws* of phenomena—a study which has, in fact, been going on all the time concurrently with the other inquiry; has been the basis on which the whole of man's practical activity has rested; and the chief agent in discrediting supernaturalism, and gradually narrowing its domain.

Supposing the Law of the Three Stages to be true, it involves, ultimately, the universal abandonment of every form of theological belief—that is to say, the disappearance of every religion resting on a supernatural foundation. Religion, however, as suggested by its etymological derivation, is the binding force of all human society, and by no writer has this been more clearly recognized than by Comte. It is religion which, under one form or another, holds society together. In order, therefore, that the social fabric may not, as a result of intellectual progress, be dissolved, and anarchy supervene, it is necessary to discover some substitute for theological religion. Science must become religious. Positivism, then, professes to be such a religion. It is ostensibly based on science, and, in Comte's view, is—in its general principles at least, if not in all its details—destined ultimately to become universal.

The fundamental problem of human life, as stated by Comte, is how to subordinate Egoism to Altruism—or, to put it in a perhaps simpler, though certainly less compact form, how to give continually-increasing predominance to the higher over the lower side of man's nature, so that his activity, which originally was inspired by necessarily individualist motives, may become ever more and more social

in its character. This is a problem which, it is almost needless to say, has been empirically dealt with, although not explicitly recognized, by every religion in its turn, and, in some cases, with remarkable success; but, owing to what Positivism regards as the fatal want of *reality* in the doctrines of all previously-existing religions, it was impossible that the success could be other than temporary. Those creeds, whatever their differences in dogmatic details, all inculcated in man's mind a spirit of reverence and submission to some supernatural power or powers, which he supposed to exercise absolute dominion over his destiny, and from which he derived all that he possessed. As a collateral and subordinate result they also, through the wisdom of their teachers, the spiritual leaders of the race, fostered the sense of duty and desire for union among those whose lives were subject to the same conditions, and who acknowledged allegiance to the same Divine Power. At first, no doubt, this was done in a very rudimentary and imperfect way; but every fresh religious development, while becoming simpler in its supernatural aspect, strengthened the social ties, until Christianity, by its doctrine that all men were children of one Father, and consequently brethren, carried the conviction of the unity of the race to a point which had never before been reached, thereby approximating more closely than any previous creed to a solution of the problem.

Assuming, however, the truth of the Positivist hypothesis as to the disappearance of theological belief, a substitute will eventually be required for the supernatural Power which has so long served, not merely as the rallying-point of man's intellectual conceptions, but as the source of inspiration of his social sympathies. This substitute Positivism finds in Humanity, which, following out a suggestion of Pascal, it personifies as an immense and eternal Being, to whose immeasurable services we are indebted for all the blessings we enjoy, and whose existence, apart altogether from disputed theological legends of origin, is, at all events, an indisputable fact.

It is not unusual to speak of Positivism as if it were a mere *à priori* emanation from Comte's brain; as if he had undertaken the task of reconstructing society in such a fashion as merely to give it a shape which should correspond with his own prejudices and conceptions; and he has accord-

ingly been taxed with arrogance and presumption. But to regard Positivism in this light is to mistake its character and its aims. It is, in theory, a scientific construction, framed in accordance with what Comte regarded as permanent and incontrovertible laws governing the world and man, and cannot, therefore, justly be condemned as a mere arbitrary scheme for which Comte alone is responsible. How far its claim in this respect is well-founded is, of course, open to question, and no one was more sensible than Comte of the difficulties which lay in the way of its general acceptance. He was fully aware of the tentative nature of his task, but, while acknowledging the possibility that shortcomings might ultimately be detected in his *doctrines*, he insisted strenuously on the virtue of his *method*. "In all inquiries," he said, "but especially in the study of social questions, the method is more important than the doctrine"; and in more than one passage of his fundamental work, the *Philosophie Positive*, he admitted, in a spirit of modesty widely separated from the arrogance laid to his charge, that different conclusions from his own might be arrived at by "more fortunate successors", employing his method, but possessed of later, and therefore more accurate, information. The tendency to agree with him that social, like all other, phenomena, are subject to the action of natural law, is certainly increasing. Whether the system he built up on this assumption will ultimately secure the adhesion of mankind, is a question which only the future can decide.

Although, however, Positivism puts forward these scientific pretensions, it has by no means the dry, cold character with which it is sometimes reproached, and which is popularly attributed to all science. Its cardinal principle is the supremacy of feeling over intellect, and this principle is fostered in every way by the conception of Humanity, by the cultivation of a sense of gratitude to the past, by a touching attitude of reverence towards the dead, by insisting on the sacredness of family ties, by exalting the functions of woman as a wife and a mother, and by the most elaborate provisions for what Comte called *Culte* — a French word which has, perhaps, no adequate equivalent in English, but is more or less imperfectly rendered by the word "worship", and which, as employed by Comte, has for its object to enforce the idea, not merely of the *solidarity*,

but—what is far more important—the *continuity* of the human race: an idea which lay at the root of Carlyle's *Hero Worship*. "The History of the World", said Carlyle, "is the Biography of Great Men", and he declared that he knew of "no nobler feeling" than "the transcendent admiration of a Great Man", to which he gave the name of worship. Comte—with whom, not merely on this but on some other points, Carlyle had much in common—gave a more universal and systematic form to this conception by his remarkable compilation of the "Positivist Calendar", which, with the double view of cultivating a knowledge of the history of the past, and stimulating our gratitude for the legacy it has bequeathed to us, devotes each day in the year to the memory of some benefactor of the race: some great man who, whether as priest or warrior, poet or statesman, thinker or worker, aided, by his efforts the great cause of human progress. Carlyle justifies hero-worship by asking whether every "true man" does not feel "that he is himself made higher by doing reverence to what is really above him"; and this question is some index to the spirit which animates Positivism. It urges its adherents to endeavour to understand the past, as a means of raising their own characters. It seeks to repress the tendency, so widely manifest in the present generation, to glorify itself at the expense of its ancestors, and to substitute for it a spirit of humility, springing from a more thorough knowledge of the extent of our obligations; in reference to which, indeed, it affirms, in one of its most characteristic axioms, that, with the lapse of time, *the living become ever more and more subject to the dominion of the dead*, and that, therefore, in adopting an attitude of irreverence towards the past, we are vainly striving to escape from an inevitable destiny.

As a further means of subordinating the individual to the community, and therefore to Humanity, Positivism seeks to break down the barrier which now exists between private and public life, by means of a series of social ceremonies, to which Comte gave the name of Sacraments, and which are intended to remind each member of a community that, in all the important epochs of his career—*e.g.*, birth, marriage, death—his interests are not exclusive, but that he forms part of a greater whole which is also concerned. This view of life, although expressed under

theological forms, has been sanctioned by all previous creeds, and Positivism merely continues the tradition.

By these and similar means it endeavours to assert the supremacy of feeling over intellect, and to stimulate the sentiment of social duty—duty to Humanity. But according to the wise phrase of Tacitus, which has been so often repeated, the difficulty is not merely to do our duty, but to know what is our duty; and here the assistance of the intellect is necessary. Such knowledge is to be obtained only by education directed to social ends; and perhaps the most important part of Comte's work is his comprehensive scheme for the reform of education, which, if carried out, would mean a veritable revolution, not merely in the methods of teaching, but in social habits and modes of life. It would be superfluous at the present moment to enter into the details of this scheme, but the magnitude of the changes it contemplates is faintly indicated by the provision that schools, as now understood, would be abolished, all children being left in their mother's care till the age of fourteen, and receiving from her the rudiments of education which they are now taught at school. This, however, is merely a preliminary process, it being proposed that, at the age of fourteen, the children of all classes, and both sexes, shall commence an encyclopædic training (occupying seven years, and founded on Comte's Classification of the Sciences), which is intended to give them a general acquaintance with the whole field of human knowledge, beginning with mathematics, passing afterwards in succession through astronomy, physics, chemistry, and biology, and terminating with morals. This education is to be imparted by an organized body of teachers, whom Comte designates by the name of a priesthood—a term which, especially in Protestant countries, is invested with certain sinister associations, and the employment of which accounts, no doubt, for the suspicion with which many people view Positivism, under the impression that, if once established, it would be dangerous to liberty. Of the existence of this feeling Comte was quite aware, but his survey of history led him to the conclusion, which, ignoring current prejudices, he formulates as a definite sociological theory—that *no society can exist, and be developed, without a priesthood in some form or other.* "All men", he said, "stand in need of education and counsel", and wherever any institution

is found to exercise these functions, there, under whatever name it is known, exists what is in essence a priesthood. In this sense the germ of a Positivist priesthood has already made its appearance, although in a very imperfect form. The science teacher, the physician, the journalist, each in his own way, performs these functions, and may consequently, within his own limits, be regarded as a priest. Comte, however, desired that what is now done in a spontaneous, informal way, with too often no guarantee of either capacity or integrity, should be done by a carefully selected body of men, trained for the purpose, devoting their whole lives to the work, and voluntarily abandoning all competition for wealth or exalted position.

But education, in the Positivist sense, must not be regarded as limited to mere book-learning. Its object, as already stated, is to inculcate principles of civic duty—to make men not merely scholars, but citizens; the education which allows any member of the community to stand aloof from the political and social movements of his time, however elaborate it may be from the intellectual stand-point, being, in Comte's view, utterly unworthy of the name. Obviously, however, the character of civic duty is governed by the conception which exists as to the nature and functions of the State; and here, again, Positivism sets forth an ideal which, if established, would effect a revolution. With the decay of theology, it regards as inevitable the decline of the hereditary principle in government, the institution of birth being directly dependent on theology. On this hypothesis, the ultimate form of government will be republican. War also, being regarded as another ally of theology, it is assumed will disappear. If, in fact, the Positivist estimate be correct, there are spontaneous tendencies now at work, by which society will ultimately be transformed—which will, by degrees, abolish the theological, monarchical, and military character it still possesses, and render it instead scientific, republican, and pacific-industrial. Abandoning, as Positivism does, all idea of a future life, and of consolation in another world for the misfortunes of this, it considers the highest duty of the human race to be that of developing, by collective efforts, the resources of the earth, its only dwelling-place, so that, by the labours of each succeeding generation, the happiness of its inhabitants may be increased. With the acceptance

of this view, many of the special classes identified with, and supported by, existing institutions will gradually become extinct, and society, in the main, will assume a purely industrial aspect, the bulk of it consisting of workmen, labouring as now, only under vastly improved conditions, and with more avowedly social aims, in association with a comparatively small body of capitalists, regarded as trustees of the wealth of the community, under the intellectual and moral guidance of the priesthood, and inspired and consoled by the companionship and sympathy of women.

Industry, however, being the basis of the society to which Positivism looks forward, and peace being ever more and more firmly established, Comte predicts that the communities into which mankind is now distributed will, by degrees, undergo a process of re-arrangement. There are, in his view, three normal forms of human association —three social aggregates which call out man's affection, and inspire him with a sense of duty—the Family, the State, and Humanity. Of these, the spirit of union is most intense in the case of the first, and most general in the case of the last; the State serving as a connecting link between the two—appealing to man's sympathy and energies on behalf of something nobler than the interests of the narrow family group, and so helping to raise him to a consciousnesss of his duty to Humanity. In order, however, that this process should be effective, the idea of Country should be real and tangible. Patriotism, in the proper sense of the term, Comte holds to be impossible in the case of such enormous societies as those now constituting the principal states of the world. They are too large to inspire a genuine sentiment of affection and devotion, and he regards it, therefore, as certain, that, sooner or later, a movement of decomposition will set in, which will reduce them within narrower limits. The ideal Positivist State, the State destined to become universal, is represented by a city with its surrounding territory; and Comte anticipates that, under the influence of this view, Europe will in time break up into a number of small republics of the size of Belgium or Tuscany, in which, as a result of the restraining discipline of the new universal spiritual power which Positivism will establish, civic duty, now too often a synonym for mere vulgar Chauvinism, will become a reality, modified, restricted, and ennobled by subordination to the still loftier sentiment of duty to Humanity.

It will be seen that the aims of Positivism are large, and it is consequently regarded with hostility by many who are ignorant of its teaching, or who shrink from its conclusions. It is sometimes classed indiscriminately with Atheism, Communism, and other theories of a purely revolutionary character; and if attention be directed only to the results which it proclaims as inevitable, and for which it seeks to prepare the way, this comparison is, perhaps, not unnatural. Between Positivism, however, and other so-called "progressive" schools, there is a profound difference in method, which is too often overlooked. While they mostly look to political changes, either peaceful or violent, as a means of achieving their ends, Positivism relies solely on moral means. It insists that a reformation in ideas must precede any alteration in institutions. One of the most pregnant and luminous political maxims with which Comte has enriched the world consists in this—that *progress is but the development of order*; from which maxim the conclusion is inevitable that, unless based upon order, progress of any permanent character is impossible. Although, therefore, the intellectual, moral, and political aspects of society will, in the course of time, if the Positivist ideal be reached, undergo modifications of which the most advanced reformers now scarcely dream, yet it is assumed that they will be effected gradually and spontaneously, as the result of previous convictions arrived at by means of Positivist education. Briefly, the method of Positivism may be described as that of evolution as opposed to revolution.

Whether the Religion of Humanity be destined to justify its title, time alone can show. Its success, or its failure, can matter nothing to its founder. The philosopher to whose genius it is due, who passed his life in poverty and obscurity, gaining a precarious subsistence as a teacher of mathematics, now sleeps peacefully, indifferent alike to praise or blame, in a quiet hollow of Père-Lachaise. It is, however, a significant testimony to the force of his doctrines, that, in various parts of the world, they have succeeded in attracting groups of devoted adherents, of different nationalities, who carry on a systematic propa-

ganda. The influence of his teaching, moreover, cannot be measured by the number of those who call themselves Positivists. In Comte's phrase, Positivism is "systematized common sense" and as such it acts, naturally enough, in different ways on different minds, influencing them to an extent which it is quite impossible to gauge. Persons of the most widely varying pursuits, although unable to accept it as a whole, and even rejecting its leading principles, have acknowledged their obligations to it on points connected with their own special experience.

The centre of the Positivist movement is at No. 10, Rue Monsieur-le-Prince, Paris, where M. Pierre Laffitte, the friend and disciple of Auguste Comte, assisted by a body of younger co-religionists, carries on the work of scientific and historical teaching essential to the progress of the cause, and where also a Positivist magazine, *La Revue Occidentale*, is published every two months. There are also groups in Havre, Rouen, and other French cities. Positivism was introduced into England by Dr. Richard Congreve, another disciple of Comte, and there are now three organized bodies in London, the best known, perhaps, of which has its head-quarters at Newton Hall, Fleur-de-lis Court, Fetter Lane. The movement has of late years spread to Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, and other British cities. It has branches also in Sweden, the United States, Chili, Brazil, India, etc. The organization is not very strict, and there are differences of opinion as to the opportuneness of giving prominence to certain aspects of the system; but, by common consent, an agreement exists on fundamental points of doctrine. All the groups cherish the same ideal, although some of them differ as to the means of arriving at it.

Comte's principal work, *La Politique Positive*, instituting the Religion of Humanity, has been translated into English, and published in four volumes by Longmans, but is now out of print. Comparatively few people, however, have sufficient time, and perhaps still fewer have the inclination, to study, as it requires and deserves, so large and important a philosophical work. Those who wish to make acquaintance with the system, without so serious an expenditure of energy, will do well to read Comte's smaller works, two of which, the *General View of Positivism*, and

the *Catechism of Positive Religion*, are published in English in a convenient form, price half-a-crown each. The former, translated by Dr. Bridges, and published by Messrs. Reeves and Turner, 196, Strand, is an admirable exposition of general principles, and, as such, is perhaps the more suitable for a person approaching the subject for the first time. It begins with a most remarkable chapter on the intellectual character of Positivism, the first reading of which, to any one not previously familiar with philosophical problems, is in itself a veritable education. In the succeeding chapters, it deals with such subjects as the nature and uses of wealth (in connexion with which it includes a profound criticism of the ordinary Economic and Socialist theories), the position and duties of the workman in a properly-organized society, the social functions of woman, the human theory of marriage, the relation of Positivism to Art, the meaning of the conception of "Humanity" as a central object of religion, etc., etc. But, for the purpose of learning the nature of the institutions by which it is proposed to give effect to these principles, and to form an idea of what society, organized in accordance with them, would be like, the reading of the *General View* should be supplemented by that of the *Catechism*, a translation of which, by Dr. Congreve, is published by Messrs. Trübner and Co., Ludgate Hill. The original appeared in 1852, four years later than the *General View*, and as a consequence, Comte's views having become more matured, the *religious* conception of Positivism is brought forward more distinctly. In it are found the list of books, known as the Positivist Library, which Comte recommended for habitual reading by those whose leisure is limited, and who are, therefore, under the necessity of making a selection from the enormous mass of literature by which they are surrounded; a copy of the Positivist Calendar; and sundry other tables, the knowledge of which is essential in order to thoroughly realize the nature of Positivism, not merely as a philosophical creed conducing to sound and tranquillizing convictions, but as a large-hearted effort to reorganize society, to stimulate material and moral progress, and to increase the sum of human happiness. An English abridgment, by Miss Martineau, of the *Philosophie Positive* is published by Trübner in two volumes. An appreciative memoir of Comte, with some account of the system, will

be found in the second volume of Lewes's *History of Philosophy*. A fuller and more synthetic view, however, is given in the *Notice sur l'Œuvre et sur la Vie d'Auguste Comte*, by Dr. Robinet, his friend and physician.

Any one wishing for further information as to the organization in England, or the methods of propaganda, is requested to apply to the SECRETARY *of the* ENGLISH POSITIVIST COMMITTEE, *Newton Hall, Fleur-de-lis Court, Fetter Lane, London, E.C.*

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